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Project experiences: primary teacher's continuous training in blended learning system

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Abstract

This work presents the training experience offered by the strategic project „The interdisciplinary organization of learning offers for the key competences training of the I-IV graders - „blended learning” type of continuous training project for teachers in primary education”. The training had a remarkable result at the educational system's level: the change of the educational paradigm from monodisciplinarity to interdisciplinarity and integrated content approach, according to the new curriculum approved by the National Ministry of Education for the fundamental acquisition cycle.

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1. Introduction

The National Law of Education no.1/2011 triggered some major changes within the Romanian educational system. In this regard, within gymnasium and high school education in conformity with art.23 line (1), point b, the elementary school level comprises the preparatory grade and grades I - IV. By article 4, the same law provides for “education and professional training of children, young people and adults that mainly aims at training competences, as being a set of multifunctional and transferable ensemble of knowledge, skills and abilities’ which are compulsory for: achieving their goals in life to their personal accomplishment and future development, according to their lifelong learning-oriented interests and aspirations; their social inclusion and active citizen participation in society;

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their occupation employment and participation in a sustainable economy management and development; building a humanistic and scientific-oriented life perspective, based on the national and universal culture and fostering intercultural dialogue; dignity, tolerance, complying to human fundamental freedom and rights-oriented education.”

Furthermore, The National Strategy for Education referring to Basic Requirements for first and second grade approved by OMECTS no.3654/2012 aims at building a child education profile for graduating second grade, which is adjusted to domain competencies established in the European Commission education framework.

The core purpose of the preparatory grade curricula aims at physical, socio-emotional, and cognitive development of language and communication as well as developing learning abilities and attitudes to ensure access to the eight key competencies, thus enforcing National Education Law No. art. 68 point (4).

Thus, from the preparatory grade perspective, the goal and main objectives of the basic requirements represents children adjustment to school demands. Taking into account that the preparatory grade can only include children from age 5 ½ to 6-7 years, the fundamental cognitive age related characteristics cannot be overlooked.

From this psycho pedagogical perspective, the preparatory grade recipient can only be considered as a key active participant in his/her own education. Thus, the preparatory grade becomes not only the bridge between kindergarten and school but also the possibility of a smooth adjustment, for children, parents and staff.

Within the legislation framework referring to formerly presented education and psycho sociological curricula design, which guarantee the importance and the role of preparatory grade, the training of teaching staff for 2012-2013 compulsory preparatory grade became a requirement and a challenge as well.

2. Designing and implementing the lifelong learning programme ‘Interdisciplinary approach of learning offers for building elementary school competences’- level 1

The elementary school teaching staff training, especially for 2012-2013 and 2013-2014 preparatory grade, was done within the strategic project framework ‘Interdisciplinary approach of learning offers for building elementary school competencies form first to fourth grade, “blended learning” continuous training programme for elementary teaching staff’ co-financed from the Social European Fund through the Sectorial Operational Programme Human Resources Development from 2007 to 2013, in conformity with POSDRU contract no.87/1.3/S/63113. This strategic project financed the training of 254 trainers and 19 203 trainees-teaching staff form elementary education. The Minister of National Education as beneficiary in partnership with Softwin S.A. and University of Bucharest designed, accredited and implemented successfully two national lifelong learning programmes: ‘Interdisciplinary approach of learning offers for building elementary school competencies form first to fourth grade, level 1, for training national trainers, and ‘Interdisciplinary approach of learning offers for building elementary school competencies form first to fourth grade, level 2, for elementary school teaching staff, and especially preparatory grade teaching staff.

The establishment of the accredited continuous training programmes for national trainers and elementary school teaching staff was a complex endeavour, with the following aspects: the trainees are senior professionals with twin psycho pedagogical specializations; the need to redesign the teaching competencies framework, generated by the active interdisciplinary learning perspective for children; the building of an open community for professionals through on-line training and e –learning platforms, to benefit from the adequate framework of debate and solving future challenging issues; the tapping of the trainees’ creative potential through posting and using e-library educational resources to facilitate teaching activities, as there are no textbooks for the preparatory grade.

These preliminary considerations were enforced and sustained through legislation in order to design the teaching curricula and psycho sociological aspects that were formerly presented.

Thus, there resulted two correlated continuous training programmes focused on interdisciplinary and content integrated approach in accordance with the new curricula approved by the National Ministry of Education for preparatory fundamental requirements, first and second grade that required:

- 40 training hours for national trainers;
- 134 blended learning hours, for elementary school teaching staff.

The blended learning education system included face to face training activities (40 hours) and online eLearning platform (94hours).

Within the Romanian continuous training system, the elementary education teaching staff training accreditation process started in June 2003. Despite of the diversity of accredited programmes themes, until the accreditation deadline of those two training programmes in July 2012, no continuous training programmes for teaching staff provider had accredited and implemented yet content integrated and interdisciplinary related programmes.

I considered worthy of highlighting the curricula novelty for preparatory grade/ the fundamental requirements from the integrated/ interdisciplinary approach perspective; novelty traced in the continuous training themes for human resources in education at elementary school cycle.

The mixt team of Softwin- the provider of lifelong learning accredited programmes and the University of Bucharest through the teaching staff expert in the initial continuous training of teachers for elementary and preschool teaching produced the textbook for *Blended learning continuous training programme for elementary school teaching staff*, as to answer the major issues and questions which concerned the primary school education community and especially preparatory grade teaching staff: Why is there a need for an integrated and interdisciplinary curricula for preparatory grade? The Model of competency-oriented curricula; School Curricula within the interdisciplinary perspective: Novelties in primary and preparatory grade curricula; Integrated Projection; Class Management; Evaluation of key competencies for elementary school; Specific Interdisciplinary Teaching and Evaluating Strategies. The Project Method.

3. Methodology milestones

Taking into account:

- The importance and need of training elementary school teaching staff to face the challenges required by the curricula and preparatory grade novelty;
- The need to apply the interdisciplinary and integrated curricula to the education system to set the premises of building key competencies, and transversal and transferable attitudes to elementary school;
- The first stage compulsory evaluation of the continuous training programme for national trainers, implemented face-to-face from 20 to 24 August 2012 in Bucharest.

We did a research within the project partnership, an assessment research where we used a qualitative investigation method (the analysis of training activities outputs), as well as a quantitative approach (data analysis for conducted investigations), to identify management and future development solutions.

The goal of our research consisted in finding the teacher's opinion regarding the way in which the approached subjects of the training program will affect the educational practices in class.

Operational objective:

- O1. To identify the relevance and usefulness of trainee textbooks from the perspective of own learning/professional needs;
- O2. To assess the satisfaction degree of trainees towards the trainer's efficiency and the strategies used in the training activity.

The target group consists of 194 elementary school teachers from all counties and Bucharest municipality. The number of future trainers from the county and Bucharest was established taking into account the estimated number of 2012-2013 preparatory grade teaching staff, so that, each trainer worked at residence county level using minimum trainees (40 face-to-face training hours and on-line mentoring activities)

Those 194 trainers were selected based on specific criteria from 405 candidates, having bachelor degrees and average experience of 19.03 years in education. In conformity with the selection criteria, the elementary school experience must be of 5 years.

The analysis of the bachelor graduation fields showed that from the 194 participants at the internship, a number of 78 that is 40,20% are Bachelor in Education Science/ Elementary and preschool education; 51 respectively 26,28% in psychology, 38 or 19,58% are graduates from specialization domains for elementary school: the Romanian language, Mathematics, History, Music, English/French; 27 from other domains. All these teaching staff graduated from a pedagogy high school.

From the perspective of concern for own training and professional development, all teaching staff from the target group consists of Bachelors. From these, 82 representing 42,26% graduated with a Master Degrees, and 9 of them, representing 4,63% have doctoral degrees.

If we take into consideration the background, the majority of subjects come from urban areas, 8.24% having rural backgrounds. It's worth highlighting that the training activities unfolded at each county level in various centres for training- teaching institutions appointed by the County school Inspectorates so that the optimal training conditions to be ensured and closest to the trainees residential areas, thus the necessary effort to be minimum. At national level in 2012-2013 there were activities in 263 training centres.

One of the research stages consisted in designing a questionnaire and an evaluation form for the continuous training programme which included different types of questions: open, closed with contradictory response, open with contradictory response and closed with multiple possibilities, multiple and ranking choices.

The questions from the questionnaire were designed to verify the achievement process of those two operational research objectives

4. Research results

To verify the operational objective O1, through which we aimed at identifying the relevance and usefulness of trainee textbooks from own learning objective perspective, we asked the following questions:

4.1. To which extent the forwarded themes appealed to you from your professional needs perspective?

The submitted answers highlighted the fact that only 2 teachers considered the training program as meaningless. The two teachers are from the group of 9 doctoral degree graduates in Education Sciences.

But 171 subjects, that represent 88%, declared themselves content with the given information, and 21 of them, that represent 11%, considered that the topics met the training needs to a large extent.

4.2. Mention three themes of the undergone programme that you consider valuable in your current practice.

All the chart topics were presented and discussed over theoretical and applicative activities of the training programme. As the comparative charts show the first three options of trainees were oriented to the following disciplines/themes:

54 frequencies, representing 28%, oriented to the 'Integrated Calendar Schedule'. Integrated projection represents a novelty in primary and preparatory grade curricula.

37 answers or 19% had as choice 'The specific teaching strategies to interdisciplinary teaching-learning-evaluation process' which include the method of projects- characteristic to interdisciplinary. The project can be approached as both a process and a product, condition which allows students to check their acquired knowledge during school, respectively as an instrument of summative evaluation and as learning strategy due to the answers at key curricula questions. The project method values students by placing them at the centre of the learning process and offering them the possibility to test their competencies through the made products and met performances. Another advantage of this method constitutes in its actual reality, and its holistic approach where the student sees the whole not the parts, learning this way to make connections between theory and practice, to apply the learning content;

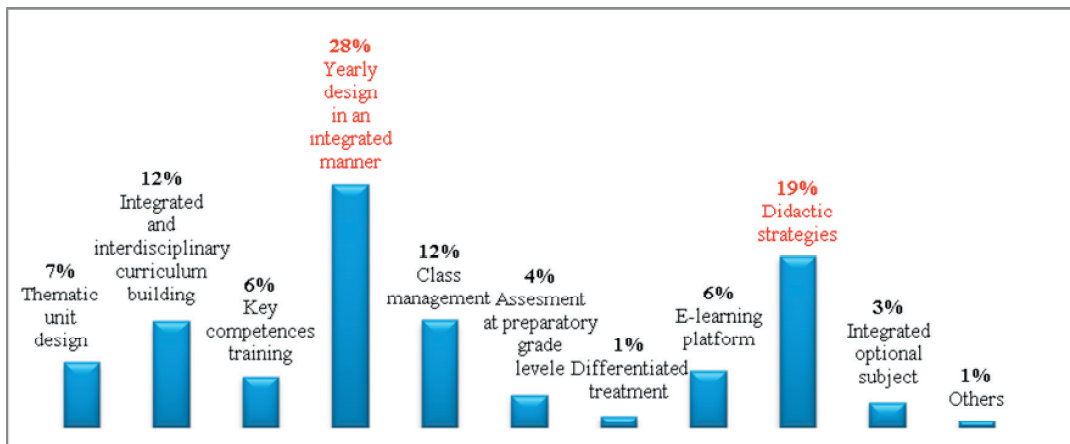


Fig.1. Distribution regarding the subjects of the continuous training programs which will be valued in the current practice of the trainees.

- 23 teachers representing 12%, considered “The integrated and interdisciplinary curricula design” and “Class Management” as first options for applicable disciplines to practice in class.

4.3. Mention three approached themes which required individual study for their understanding (course textbook reading, tapping into other resources etc.)

After the answers were processed it has been shown, again, that the subjects requiring extra effort for advanced study are related to the novelties imposed by the curricula for primary education - the fundamental purchasing cycle. Thus, from the integrated projected perspective, integrated curricula and interdisciplinary teaching strategies: for 33 teachers that is 17%, require advanced learning ‘Integrated Projection’; 31 teachers or 16%, considered more difficult the ‘Curricula related aspects’; 29 subjects that is 15%, consider more difficult ‘Interdisciplinary Strategies-project method’ and platform tasks.

122 from 194 trainees, 62.88% had 4 main options.

In the context of the curricula novelty for fundamental requirements and preparatory grade, these options justify due to the fact that: not all trainees became teachers in the primary education system following the closing of the Bachelor in Education Sciences; although the common features of trainees consist in graduating from Pedagogy high school, only 27 trainees have 5 to 10 years in elementary education, the others 167 having from 11 to 41 years experiences. Integrated approach is a novelty element; in the teaching activity, until 2012-2013 school year, the calendar schedule consisted of lesson not learning unit-oriented disciplines.

In conclusion, the teaching staff who participated in the training activity had no opportunity to gain the correct scientific information linked to the novelty elements previously mentioned.

Due to the fact that these novelty elements represented in the same time professional needs and own learning objectives, and from the answers for the three questions, we draw the following:

-99% (192 trainees) consider the presented training activities as useful in the teaching activity / and mostly in the preparatory grade;

-70.61% or 137 teachers appreciate that: ‘Integrated calendar planning’; ‘Specific interdisciplinary teaching-learning-evaluation teaching strategies’ ‘Interdisciplinary integrated curricula design’; ‘Class Management’ are the key disciplines of the training programme to be used/applied in the class’

- 62.88% that is 122 teaching staff appreciate the same novelty themes and the platform as requiring advanced study; this proves that the operational objective O1 was realized, being relevant and useful: “of urgency and applicability in their current activity”.

“The textbook and the training sessions as well, were appreciated by the trainees as being relevant and well planned leading to a good understanding and doing some projections within the practical internship for future activities. The feedback received from the trainees conveys their satisfaction for the training clarity and diversity”.

4.4. To which extent were the language and terminology used by the trainer during training activities adequate? Give arguments to your answer.

At this question, 92% of the future national trainers have replied: “to a great extent”. The language and terminology used during training were adequate, and for 8% they were “highly” adequate. Following the analysis of the arguments corresponding to available options, there were the below highlights: accessible, clear, concise expert language, clear explanations, nonetheless the trainers professionalism and expertise were spotted as well.

The comparative diagrams reflect that the accessibility (27%), adequacy (26%) explanatory (26%) language features, matched the professionalism of trainers (20%), and created the perfect environment to proper understanding of the conveyed body of knowledge, so that understanding is a function of message structure.

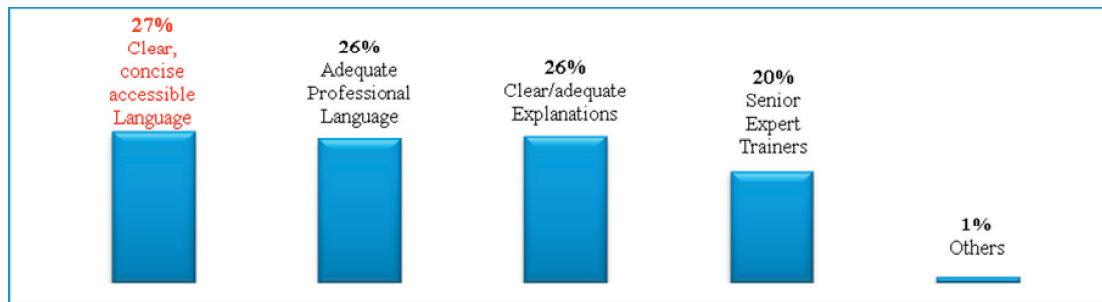


Fig. 2. Distribution referring to the details given by the trainees regarding the language and terminology used by the trainers during the courses.

Furthermore, understanding generates interpretation and later assuming meanings based on own judgments. Translated as creativity, assuming meanings based on own judgments can make one reach full understanding of an issue. Taking into account that each trainee became national trainer during the second training programme implementation stage, then understanding, interpretation and assuming meanings for the conveyed body of knowledge and information played a key role.

4.5. Do you think that the methodology used by the trainer was efficient? Give arguments to your answer.

Referring to the training methodology that was appreciated as being efficient to a great extent by 91% of the trainees that is 176 teaching staff, 6% respectively 12 respondents considered it efficient in a large extent, 1% or 2 to an average extent 2% did not responded.

The motivation of efficiency “to a great extent” was supported by the different types of methods used during training: 43% various interactive methods; 36% Efficient methods tailored on the trainees’ needs; 11% Many practical activities; 7% Rich material and 3% Others.

As you can notice, the various interactive methods (43%) are appreciated at all training levels: both initial and continuous training and all age range: children, students and adults, as teaching practice proves. We cannot overlook the appreciations by 36% related to method-training need relation, respectively those connected to the highly applicative training characteristics. In some trainees perspective, “the most efficient and appreciated ways of conveying the body of knowledge were the interactive ones, based on team work and the critical thinking method.”

Referring to the trainer’s appreciation, more than 90% represent the trainees’ appreciations to trainers who during the training activities made themselves highly listened to, and understood; manifesting flexibility, catching attention, value experiences and offer feedback.

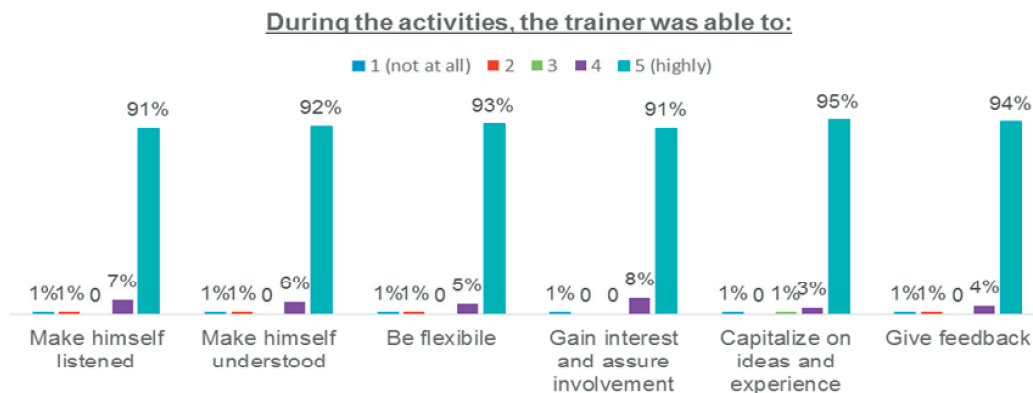


Fig. 3. Distribution referring to the trainer's activity

From the last three answers, we can imply that both trainer approaches and their training strategies being extremely appreciated, therefore the second study objective was met.

5. Conclusion

The evaluation of the continuous training programme by the target group of 194 teaching staff which became national trainers, following the closing of continuous training programme, highlighted the below aspects (Csorba, 2013, p. 3): „the absence of a profile for the absolvent of the mandatory education realized by responsible institutes according to which the attitudes, the capacities and the desired values have an inter and trans disciplinary character; the overuse of the unilateral curriculum and the reduced actions of promoting integrated curriculum as an innovative way of organizing and resuming contents from different areas in order for Students to have an integrated image about the world, specific to building the key competences; the reduced instruments of primary teachers with poor training and insufficient modern techniques to build key competences for students as well as poor abilities in dealing with interdisciplinary”. From the perspective of the relation between initial and continuous training, we emphasize that at the Bachelor Level, in Faculties of Education Sciences, there is no discipline treating the integrated interdisciplinary approach. These aspects are studied at “The Curricula Theory” in the second year- Bachelor degree. The Master's Degree of “Pre secondary Education, politics and development strategies” of Faculty of Psychology and Education Sciences of University of Bucharest is based on transdisciplinary area subjects. To make the bridge between initial and continuous training possible, universities should provide the general theoretical framework for those disciplines included in the continuous training curricula especially for Ministry of National Education priority Curricula Subjects from the educational and training policies perspective.

Through lifelong training programmes implemented within the strategic project: “Interdisciplinary Organization of learning offers for the key competences training for first to fourth grade students- ‘blended learning’ continuous training programme for primary education teaching staff”, due to efficient training activities done by 194 national trainers, the training succeeded mostly due to changing educational practices and precisely to changing the educational paradigm, switching from sole discipline to interdisciplinary approach and proving, as a result of two years implementation of the continuous training programme and teaching activity of over 19.000 teaching staff, the fact that, “the preparatory grade equals happy learning!”

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